

# THE SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF A REGIONAL CENTRE: AN OBSERVATION IN NAURU

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## A. GEOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

The Republic of Nauru is a small single island. The total land area is 21.3 sq km and that of the territorial waters 32 sq km. The island lies 166 degrees 56 minutes East (longitude) and 0 degrees 31 minutes South (latitude), in the Pacific Ocean. It is the only Micronesian country located in the Southern Hemisphere.

Nauru is 300 km from even Banaba Island, its nearest neighbour. This geographical isolation has brought the small island country great wealth; no other nation can lay claim to an enormous natural resource of mineral phosphate. Nauru is a low-lying island: its highest point is 65 metres above sea level. Its coastline consists of coralline cliffs rising to a plateau of phosphatic rock over a metre thick. Most of the islanders live along the coralline fringe.

The majority of government buildings and public facilities are in Yaren, the population of which is about 8,800 according to 1987 statistics. Of the 8,800, five thousand are Nauruan and 2,500 are other Pacific islanders such as Tuvalians and Kiribatians who mostly work in the phosphate mining industry. The remaining 1,300 are Chinese and Caucasians --mainly Australians and New Zealanders.

Phosphate mining is the only means of financial support for the country and Nauru has developed the mining industry extensively. However, it is estimated that phosphate resources will be exhausted by 1996. The most crucial issue for the present Nauru administration is the rehabilitation of the island after the exhaustion of phosphate. The government is attempting to maintain national wealth by investing in business and real estate and dealing in the financial markets of metropolitan areas of the Pacific Rim such as Auckland, Sydney, and Honolulu.

The Nauru Government has never announced the condition of the national economy officially. According to the World Bank, however, the national revenue of Nauru was estimated at approximately \$A77,000,000 in 1986. Of this, \$A37,000,000 represented premiums from phosphatic mining rights. Its national expenditure was estimated about \$A76,000,000 in 1986, of which education absorbed 2,300,000 dollars.

Nauru became independent in 1968. The first President was Hammer DeRobert. Since then the government has been supervised by DeRobert except for a period in 1976. However, in the Parliament of 1989 a motion of no confidence was tabled against DeRobert by the opposition party because of dissatisfaction with the budget. This motion was finally approved by ten votes to five. As a result the DeRobert administration ended. In the background of this political change there was said to be social concern over the future of the land after the extraction operations cease. Land rehabilitation is certainly one of the most sensitive issues in today's Nauru.

## B. CHARACTERISTICS OF EDUCATION IN NAURU

Nauruans are entitled to free education from the age of six to the age of sixteen. According to 1985 data there are four national/private pre-primary schools in Nauru and 383 children are studying there. 1,451 pupils are studying in the seven primary schools. In addition, there are two high schools at the general secondary level and 465 students are studying there.

The Nauru Government has a remarkable education policy at higher levels. Nauruan children are sent abroad to high schools-- mainly in Australia and New Zealand-- when they reach secondary and tertiary level. According to 1984 data, 88 Nauruan students went abroad to continue their secondary or tertiary education. Their major destinations for study were Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland in Australia. Most of these students are supported financially by government scholarships. In comparison with other Pacific island countries which do not even have compulsory education at the primary level, this policy deserves special mention. The economic prosperity of present Nauruan society alone makes its implementation possible.

On the other hand, if any Nauruan students intend to get secondary education, their only option is to go abroad. This situation brings with it psychological and social difficulties to such students and to their families. There is little inclination to discuss this issue in Nauruan education. However, some interviewees who have experienced study in Australian secondary schools responded that they missed their home but were patient under the stressing environment of the boarding school. This isolation from their parents and a greatly different environment from their native community possibly contributes to psychological difficulties and may reduce motivation to continue studying abroad. Some students have suspended or dropped out from their study in boarding schools and gone back to Nauru.

## C. GENERAL SITUATION OF THE NAURU CENTRE

### a. Location and Facilities

The Nauru Centre is an independent one-storey wooden building located in Aiwo district--the location of most government departments. The Director's private residence is close by. This flat was offered by NPC specially for the Director's use. The Centre has a reception area, a tutorial room, a small library, the Director's office, a bathroom, and a kitchen. The tutorial room has a high-frequency radio to receive distance tutorials.

### b. Staff

The Director at the time of our visit was Ms. Makerita Va'ai who came originally from Western Samoa. The Centre had two other staff: one typist/clerk and one part-time cleaner. After our visit in September 1991, one Lecturer, Mr. Eddi Scotty, joined the team (according to the Report of 1991). It could be said that the entire planning and management of the Centre was practically the Director's personal responsibility. And the Director seemed to have, it is almost needless to say, more than enough skills and talents to carry out the demanding role. However, perhaps some difficulties of education in Nauru were implied by the fact that the Director was Samoan.

### c. Enrolments

Enrolments by course between 1990-1991 were as follows:

	1990		1991	
	Semester1	Semester2	Semester1	Semester2
Preliminary	2	2	16	14
Foundation	6	3	16	5
Vocational	11	19	55	23
Degree	11	13	17	20
Preschool	3	2	23	3
Total	33	29	127	65

Of the total enrolments of 1991, Nauruans accounted for 86 percent and non-Nauruan students accounted for the remaining 32 percent. Most of the non-Nauruan students were Tuvalian or Kiribatian workers involved in the phosphate mining industry and their families. According to the director, their learning morale was generally stronger than that of Nauruan students.

### d. Other Activities

The Nauru Centre provided several programmes for their autonomous activities and seminars. These programmes included for example, an AIDS prevention seminar, a poster contest for the "Clean up Nauru" Campaign, an introduction to Nauruan language, a public administration seminar for government workers and a creative writing seminar. Especially the Director was putting a great deal of effort into creative writing. Under her supervision this programme was continuing once a month in a cultivated and enthusiastic atmosphere. Several members of the programme were interviewed. Their common characteristic was that they had all received a relatively high education and were greatly interested in participation in cultural activities and intellectual and social issues such as music performance, the women's rights movement and so on. Some of them had lived abroad. They were, in a sense, the opinion leaders of Nauruan society. The Nauru Centre played a critical role in organizing such socially-significant people and in creating a cultural milieu that has relatively great influence.

## D. THE NAURU CENTRE IN NAURUAN SOCIETY

The government adopts a similar policy for higher and tertiary levels of education to that for secondary education. The Nauru Government selects ten to twenty Nauruan students by competitive performance in the university entrance examinations of the Australian Government and sends them to higher education institutions in Australia, New Zealand, and other countries of the Commonwealth. In 1991 25 students were sent under the governmental sponsorship to Australia, New Zealand and Fiji. Of the 25 students, 19 students studied in Australia, 3 students went to New

Zealand, and 3 to Fiji. In addition to these, 39 Nauruan students went abroad to study at their own expense in 1991. Out of these private overseas students, 34 went to Australia and the other five went to New Zealand. No students went to Fiji.

From this data, Australia naturally seems to be the most influential country on the higher education of Nauru in the Commonwealth. By the same token only small numbers of government scholarship students and no private students at all selected Fiji for their higher education institution, even though USP is the only comprehensive university in the South Pacific Region.

This situation may imply that Nauruans tend to underestimate the educational potential of USP.